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# The New Geography of Work
## Power to the Precarious?

*Andrew Ross*

**Abstract**

This article describes the emergence of a prized labor market in sectors that policymakers have designated as the creative industries. Statistics generated about these sectors have been legion. By contrast, there has been precious little attention to the quality of work life with which such livelihoods are associated. The article considers several features of creative work that have a qualitative dimension and recommends a policy-minded approach to each. The second half of the article examines the case for a cross-class coalition of the sort proposed by the anti-precarity movement. Though they occupy opposite ends of the labor market hierarchy, workers in retail and low-end services and the 'creative class' temping in high-end knowledge sectors share certain elements of precarious, or nonstandard employment. While these different segments have existential conditions in common, is there any reason to imagine that they interpret or experience them in similar ways? And, even if they do, is there enough commonality to forge a political coalition of interest against the class polarization associated with economic liberalization?

**Key words**
class ■ creativity ■ industry ■ work

ANYONE WHO wants to survey the origins of cultural studies will feel obliged to cite Raymond Williams' painstaking analyses, from the late 1950s onwards, of how the term 'culture' has been variously identified and interpreted (Williams, 1985, 2001). From our vantage point today, it is noteworthy that, in all of these surveys, Williams barely dwelt on the topic of culture as a form of labor – on how people actually make a living out of culture. No doubt, there are several reasons for this inattention,

one of them being a certain distancing from laborism itself. Without doubting Williams' own indebtedness, by dint of his background and standpoint, to the world of labor, it is fair to say that his writings helped to fuel the cultural turn away from economism that characterized the laborist left of the day. Another, more specific reason for his disregard may be that the landscape of cultural work, in the era of the Keynesian welfare state, was a relatively settled environment, and not especially eligible for the kind of thorough reconceptualization that Williams set himself to undertake. Those who made a secure living from culture belonged either to the stable commercial industries of broadcasting, recording and publishing, or to the design and academic professions. By contrast, the non-commercial sector, in part supported by public subsidy, was a vast domain of nonstandard work, entirely marginal to the productive economy but essential to the prestige of elites and the democratic lifeblood of the polity.

The study of artworlds (broadly defined) was a steady subfield of the social sciences, and the few economists who surveyed the productivity of artists puzzled over the gap between their income or performance outputs and that of their counterparts in service occupations more amenable to quantitative analysis. The most well-known, William Baumol, would conclude that the performing arts in particular were subject to a 'cost disease' which condemns the cost per live performance to rise at a rate persistently faster than that of a typically manufactured good (Baumol and Bowen, 1966). Hampered by this cost disease (often known as the Baumol effect), the arts, in his judgment, could either join the productive sector – by emulating the commercial culture industries in their adaptation of productivity-boosting technologies – or conform to the model of social services, like health or education, which produce a subsidized public good under the heavy hand of bureaucratic administration.

In the decades since Williams' inattention and Baumol's prognosis, the ground has shifted quite noticeably, and in ways neither could have been expected to predict. Cultural labor finds itself in the cockpit of attention, front and center of the latest rollouts of neoliberal programs. As paradigms of entrepreneurial selfhood, 'creatives', as they are now labeled, are the apple of the policymaker's eye, and are recipients of the kind of lipservice usually bestowed by national managers on high-tech engineers as generators of value. Art products are the objects of intense financial speculation; cultural productions are top hit-makers in the jackpot end of the New Economy; 'cultural districts' are posited as the key to urban prosperity; and creative industries policy is embraced as the anchor of regional development by governments around the world on the lookout for a catch-up industrial plan. In the business world, creativity is viewed as a wonderstuff for transforming workplaces into powerhouses of value, while intellectual property – the lucrative prize of creative endeavor – is increasingly regarded as the 'oil of the 21st century'.

This paradigm shift has been well documented in accounts of the emergence and international spread of creative industries policy (Garnham,

2005; Hartley, 2004; Hesmondalgh and Pratt, 2005; Huws, 2007; Keane, 2007; Lovink and Rossiter, 2007); the career of the 'creative city' as a recipe for development (Florida, 2002; Landry, 2000; Peck, 2005); the explosive growth of knowledge-driven business sectors that depend on 'intellectual capital' (Saxenian, 2006; Stewart, 1997); and the conceptual turn toward the 'expediency of culture' (Yudice, 2004). The shift has occurred with a rapidity that has generated widespread skepticism, not least among cultural workers themselves, unaccustomed to attention, let alone the proverbial limelight (Wallinger and Warnock, 2000). Consequently, the policies, programs and statistical outcomes are often regarded as a slick routine, designed to spin value out of thin air, or else aimed, more surreptitiously, at bringing the last, most recalcitrant, holdouts into the main currents of marketization, where they can swim alongside the other less exotic species (managers, insurance agents, lawyers) that are lumped together, in Richard Florida's widely cited formulation, as the 'creative class'.

So, too, there is an element of desperation in this turn toward a 'creative economy'. Managers struggling to retain a competitive edge in globalizing markets are easily sold on any evidence that creative activity in and of itself can generate value for a city, region or nation. If nothing else, there is the proven capacity of 'creative districts' to boost realty prices in select cities, building on well documented and, by now, formulaic cycles of gentrification. At the same time, in a milieu when offshore outsourcing has become a way of life, there is the hope that jobs in a creative economy will not be transferred elsewhere. Among their other virtues, creative occupations do not entail cost-intensive institutional supports, like those in high-skill manufacturing sectors, which require expensive technical infrastructures as well as customarily lavish tax incentives. All in all, the combination of low levels of public investment with the potential for high-reward outcomes is guaranteed to win the attention of managers on the lookout for a turnaround strategy. Accustomed to seeing corporate investors come and go, they have seized this rare opportunity to capitalize on a place-based formula for redevelopment. Last but not least, there are those who see the creative economy as a plausible model for job creation that offers work gratification on a genuinely humane basis.

It is important to note that the uptake of these creative industries policies represents a shift in the mentality of capital-owners and their compliant allies in the legislature, though not in the conduct of capital in general. After all, the profile of the creative economy fits the bill of capitalist expansion into untapped markets, utilization of hitherto marginal labor pools and the exploitation of neglected sources of value. Less proven is whether these activities can support a productive economy with an engine of sustainable jobs at its core. Much of the evidence so far suggests that the primary impact is on land value and rent accumulations, which are side effects, to say the least, rather than transmissions, of the ideas originated by creative workers (Harvey, 2001).

Not surprisingly for a policy-intensive paradigm, statistics generated about the creative sector have been legion. By contrast, there has been precious little attention to the quality of work life with which such livelihoods are associated. No doubt it is ritually assumed that creative jobs, by their nature, are not deficient in gratification. If anything, their packaging of mental challenges and sensuous self-immersion is perceived to deliver a surplus of pleasure and satisfaction. Proponents of this line of thinking may well concede that the life of creatives, in the past, has also been associated with misery, frustration and deprivation, but the given wisdom is that those pitfalls were primarily the result of economic inattention and social marginalization. In a milieu where creativity is celebrated on all sides, such drawbacks will surely dissolve.

Yet the ethnographic evidence on knowledge and creative industry workplaces shows that job gratification, for creatives, still comes at a heavy sacrificial cost – longer hours in pursuit of the satisfying finish, price discounts in return for aesthetic recognition, self-exploitation in response to the gift of autonomy, and dispensability in exchange for flexibility (Ehrenstein, 2006; Gill, 2002, 2007; Huws, 2003; Perrons, 2003; Reidl et al., 2006: Ross, 2002). If policymakers were to undertake official surveys of the quality of work life, they would find the old formula for creative work very much alive and well in its newly marketized environment (Oakley, 2004). In this respect, arguably the most instrumentally valuable aspect of the creative work traditions is the carry-over of coping strategies, developed over centuries, to help endure a feast-or-famine economy in return for the promise of success and acclaim. The combination of this coping mentality with a production code of aesthetic perfectibility is a godsend for managers looking for employees capable of self-discipline under the most extreme job pressure. It is no surprise, then, that the 'artist' has been seen as the new model worker for high-skill, high-reward employment (Menger, 2002).

It would be a mistake, however, to see the creative economy sector as simply a marketized uptake of these long-standing traditions of painstaking endeavor and abiding forbearance. For the precariousness of work in these fields also reflects the infiltration of models of nonstandard employment from low-wage service sectors. The chronic contingency of employment conditions for all low-skill workers and migrants is more and more normative, where before it was characteristic of a secondary labor market, occupied primarily by women working on a part-time basis, or at discounted wages in an era dominated by the 'family wage' of the male breadwinner (Beck, 2000). Capital-owners have won lavish returns from casualization – subcontracting, outsourcing and other modes of flexploitation – and increasingly expect the same in higher-skill sectors of the economy. As a result, we have seen the steady march of contingency into the lower and middle levels of the professional and high-wage service industries.

This development has prompted some theoretical commentators, especially from the post-operaismo Italian school, to see the formation of a multi-class *precariat*, somehow linked by shared concerns about the

insecurity of all aspects of their lives (Foti, 2004, 2006; Neilson and Rossiter, 2005; Papadopoulos et al., 2008). The youthful cast of this formation is often evoked by the slogan of 'the precarious generation', and the activist networks generated on its behalf are driven by a spontaneous, though far from dogmatic, belief that the precariat is the post-Fordist successor to the proletariat, both in theory and practice (Raunig, 2004, 2007). Even if this concept is theoretically plausible, does it make sense to imagine cross-class coalitions of the precarious capable of developing a unity of consciousness and action on an international scale? Critics of this view dismiss as naive the assumption that a highly trained aristocracy of labor will find common cause with the less skilled, simply on the basis of insecurity. Yet we cannot afford to reject out of hand any evidence of, or potential for, such forms of cross-class identification, and so the second part of this article will consider the case for and against the theory. In the first part, I will see how far an insistence on qualitative assessments of work life will take us in changing the conversation about the new precarious work ethic that has emerged under neoliberal auspices.

## Good Job, Bad Job

The concept of 'quality of work life' is somewhat tainted today, largely because of its association with managerial responses to the 'revolt against work' that broadly manifested itself in Europe and North America in the early 1970s. Alienation on the job arising from boring, repetitive or otherwise ungratifying tasks produced widespread discontent in white-collar as well as blue-collar workplaces (Bell, 1956; Terkel, 1974). The result – pervasive sabotage, chronic absenteeism and wildcat strikes – was interpreted by corporate and government managers as a system-wide protest against the factory-centered conditions of Fordist industrialization (Garson, 1975; Tronti, 1980; US Department of Health, 1973; Zerzan, 1974).

In the first of a long series of management innovations designed to stimulate a jaded workforce, employers introduced quality of work life (QWL) programs to inject some participation into decision-making and deliver more personal fulfilment to employees. These efforts to make work more feelgood and meaningful also marked the onset of a long decline in job security. As the workplace became more inclusive, free or self-actualizing for employees, it became less just and equal in its provision of guarantees. This was as true for production workers, reorganized into teams exercising a degree of decision-making around their modules, as for white-collar employees, encouraged to be self-directing in their work applications. In either case, the managerial program to sell liberation from drudgery was accompanied by the introduction of risk, uncertainty and nonstandard work arrangements. As far as corporate conduct went, it is fair to say that one hand gave while the other took.

This two-handed tendency reached its apotheosis in the New Economy profile of the 'free agent', when the youthful (and youth-minded) were urged to break out of the cage of organizational work, and go it alone as

self-fashioning operatives, outside of the HR umbrella of benefits, pensions and steady merit increases (Pink, 2001). By this time, large corporations were being scorned by management gurus for their bureaucratic stagnancy, just as their work rules, hierarchies and rituals were condemned for stifling initiative and creativity. The small, entrepreneurial start-up was hailed as a superior species, likely to adapt quicker and evolve further in a volatile business environment (Henwood, 2003). These were the roots of the much-hyped face-off between the Old Economy and New Economy in the 1990s. The former was seen as risk-averse, coddling employees with a sheltering raft of benefits and securities, and smothering their sense of individual purpose and potential. The latter was risk-tolerant, and it tested employees with an endurance course of challenges and edgy feats, rewarding their mettle and initiative with jackpot-style wealth.

The legacy of this face-off is clearly visible in the breathless business rhetoric applied to the new 'creative economy', often portrayed as the rule-defying guarantor of the next bonanza. Temporarily homeless in the wake of the dotcom bust, corporate lipservice to the powers of 'creativity' looks to have found a new haven. Because the creative industries are, in part, a construction of the state's making – policymakers routinely lump together a motley range of professions under that rubric – this rhetoric has also become the language of government, at federal, regional and city levels. In place of exhortations to think outside the box addressed to systems analysts, sales agents, project managers and other corporate echelons, we now hear politicians and policymakers proclaiming that the future of wealth generation might lie in the hands of bona fide creative practitioners.

As before, however, the condition of entry into the new high-stakes lottery is to leave your safety gear at the door; only the most spunky, agile and dauntless will prevail. This narrative is little more than a warmed-over version of social Darwinism, but, when phrased seductively, it is sufficiently appealing to those who are up for the game. Once they are in, some of the players thrive, but most subsist, neither as employers or employees, in a limbo of uncertainty, juggling their options, massaging their contacts, never knowing where their next project or source of income is coming from. The resultant cycle of feast and famine is familiar to anyone whose livelihood folds into the creative economy. Its unpredictable tempo is far removed from the gospel of steady, hard work and thrifty gain glorified in the 19th-century work ethic (Rodgers, 1978). Indeed, it is more like the survivor challenge of an action video game, where skills, sense of timing and general alertness to the main chance enables the protagonist to fend off threats and claim the prize. In return for giving up the tedium of stable employment, there is the thrill of proving yourself by finding out if you have what it takes. Neoliberalism has succeeded wherever its advocates have preached the existential charge of this kind of work ethic, and of the virtues of being liberated from the fetters of company rules, managerial surveillance and formal regularity.

The low-wage equivalent is a different kind of limbo. For one thing, the rungs on the ladder of social mobility have almost all been knocked out,

so that there is little chance of upward advancement for those in the vast majority of low-end service jobs. While there are no prizes to be won, the prospect of being trapped in a dead-end job further lubricates the labor markets in employment sectors already characterized by churning. High rates of turnover, stagnant wage levels and chronic disloyalty are characteristic features of a formal service economy, where intermittent work is more and more the norm. Casualization, driven home by market deregulation and neoliberal labor reform, has placed an ever-growing portion of the workforce on temporary and/or part-time contracts.

In the informal economy, migrant workers occupy more and more of the vital markets; without their contingent labor, the whole machinery of services would grind to a halt. While their rights and work conditions are degraded by off-the-books employment, their freedom of movement is also prized. Migrancy is what guarantees their remittances, their transnational options, and their ability to evade state scrutiny and capitalist discipline. While mass mobility facilitates the ready availability of workers, often in straitened circumstances, the flighty nature of migrant labor is a source of frustration to the state's strictures of population management and capital-owners' desire to control labor supply. The evasion tactics adopted by transnational migrants in their running battle with agents of repressive border policies, unfair labor regulation, detention camps and deportation lie on the frontlines of neoliberal conflict, both a consequence of discipline and a fugitive response to it (Mezzadra, 2001).

The escape of capital to cheaper locations in other parts of the world is never a clean getaway. Transferring dirty or dangerous industrial operations to less regulated regions is increasingly a corporate liability when toxic substances taint the brand by showing up back home via the intercontinental trade in material goods and food produce. So, too, the bargaining power of labor gets relocated and, sooner or later, asserts itself in a variety of ways (Silver, 2003). The mercurial rise of workers' protests in the world economy's labor-intensive Chinese centers of accumulation is a case in point (Lee, 2007). The chronic 'shortage' of unskilled workers – migrants in their millions who fail to show up, en masse, in Guangdong's sweated factories each year – is further evidence of the unorganized form that such 'refusals of work' can take (Ross, 2006). The more recent response on the part of the Chinese government – new labor legislation (from January 2008) that guarantees the right to sign contracts with no fixed termination dates for employees after ten years of service – is evidence that regulators can be made accountable if a coalition of advocates connects effectively with public concern about precarity.

To insist, today, on the quality of work life is certainly to call attention to these precarious conditions, both in high-end and low-income occupational sectors. But the ingredients of that demand require careful consideration. It would be a mistake, for example, simply to hark back to the diet of security enjoyed by a significant slice of white collars and core manufacturing workers in the Fordist era. The male breadwinner of the

postwar 'family wage' breathed a different air from those employed in the secondary labor markets of the era, and did so at the cost of the latter. Employers conceded to workers' gains in core sectors only because they profited so handsomely from the degraded income and status of female pink-collar workers, while the whole system of 'standard employment' rested on the sprawling foundation of unwaged labor in the home. Justice for one was not justice for all, and the trade union leadership of that era, notwithstanding its affirmation of an alternative understanding of how the economy works, can rightly be faulted for its complicity in this multi-tiered arrangement.

In addition, it is important to recall that one of the most salient elements of the 'revolt against work' was a protest against the long-term tedium of organizational employment. Many workers concluded that the conformist discipline of this kind of stability had not produced 'meaningful' experiential outcomes, only classic (Marxist) alienation on the job. 'Jobs for life' was not a recipe for liberation nor should it be. Nor could incremental gratification through consumer materialism be considered a long-term source of fulfilment, even if it were sustainable as a way of life. Once again, we should acknowledge the compliant role of the era's labor chieftains. Because they so obviously disciplined the workforce, delivering strike-free productivity in return for a steady regimen of wage and benefit increases, their members had to resort to independent action to call attention to the inhumanity of an industrial work process that treated them like cogs in a machine.

When we speak of quality of work life today, we cannot speak of security as an aspiration if it entails a guaranteed slot in a sclerotic organizational hierarchy, where employee participation is clearly tokenistic, and where the division of labor functions as a fixed and formal regime of discipline. The appeal of self-employment, so pervasive, for example, in the creative sector, is a powerful draw, and it should not be conflated entirely with the neoliberal ethos of the self-absorbed entrepreneur. The market evangelism of neoliberalism has produced so many converts because it exploits the credo that individuals actually have some power over their economic destinies. Yet this belief is not the exclusive property of market fundamentalists; it can and should be shared by individuals in a vibrant work environment that is also protected from the rough justice of the market. Nor does the appetite for self-direction necessarily engender a posture of selfish neglect for the welfare of others. Autonomy is not the opposite of solidarity, as is commonly assumed. On the contrary, solidarity, if it is to be authentic, has to be learned – it cannot be enforced – and this can only occur when we are free enough to choose it as an outcome of efforts and ideas that we share with others.

It would be misguided, then, to dismiss the hunger for 'free agency' as a mere product of market ideology; the flexibility it delivers is a response to an authentic employee demand. Autonomy is a critical goal, and while its attainment is more approachable for the self-employed, there is no reason

why it cannot be nurtured inside organizations where the work process has been genuinely humanized. In either case, the ability of individuals to take pleasure in freely applying their skills depends on a just social environment which supports and rewards all the players, and does not stigmatize those who do not land the most glittering prizes.

Contrary to market dogma, basic cultural freedoms can only be secured through regulation. Media deregulation, to take one example, has resulted in a drastic reduction in the range and quality of available public opinion (conversely, the power of the dominant culture industry corporations depends on the lavish support of several government agencies). Regulation of creative work need not stifle innovation (another marketeer myth), it just formalizes its conditions of possibility, outlawing the kind of hyper-competitive environment where most of the players turn into losers, along with all of those declared unfit for the contest for reasons of age, attitude or unreadiness. Consequently, it is harmful to perpetuate the belief that innovation is solely the product of preternaturally endowed individuals. All creative work is the result of shared knowledge and labor; originality springs forth not from the forehead of geniuses but from ideas pooled by a community of peers and fellow-travelers. Aesthetic champions are good at what they do, but we cannot promote the assumption that they alone should be beneficiaries of a winner-takes-all culture of creativity centered on the acquisition of intellectual property.

Among the other resident dogmas of the creative life is the long-standing equation with suffering – as expressed in the stereotype of the 'struggling artist' – but there is no natural connection there. Personal sacrifice is not a precondition of creativity, though widespread acceptance, or internalization, of this credo is surely one of the reasons why employees in the creative sectors tolerate long hours, discounted compensation and extreme life pressure in return for their shot at a gratifying work product. Few things are more damaging to the quality of work life than this belief that physical and psychic hardship is the living proof of valuable mental innovation. When compared to the ravages of heavy industrial labor, this may appear to be a minor threat to public health, but its lionization in cutting-edge sectors like high-tech design has accelerated its spread to an alarming range of workplaces and occupations.

In place of this debilitating ethos, we need to see creative work as a basic human right, or entitlement, of the workforce. After all, the call for meaningful, stimulating work was a bedrock demand of the original 'revolt against work'. The current spate of attention to the creative sectors is an opportunity to remember that this desire persists as a goal of all employees. Creative industries policy-making was bolstered by Tony Blair's faux-populist declaration that 'everyone is creative'. To fully realize this loose rhetoric about the creativity of ordinary people will require a progressive industrial policy driven not by GDP stats about the revenue extracted from creative jobs, but by qualitative input about what makes a job creative.

To speak of rights and entitlements is also to speak of obligations on the part of the state and employers. Yet most governments and firms have been withdrawing from their obligations for over two decades now through a combination of (a) welfare provision reforms and weakened labor regulation on the part of the state and (b) subcontracting, offshore outsourcing and benefit offloading on the part of corporations. The latest retreat has been in the privatization and/or reduced state payments to pension plans, even to the most securely employed. As a result, the ever-ageing retiree population in advanced economies will soon be joining the ranks of their precarious brethren in the developing world (Blackburn, 2007a, 2007b).

In contrast to the neoliberal drift in Anglophone countries, some of the European social democracies had created new forms of welfare to protect workers in flexible labor markets. Termed flexicurity, the policy was pioneered in Denmark and the Netherlands in the 1990s, and was subsequently adopted in north-western European countries (Jørgensen and Madsen, 2007; Wilthagen et al., 2004). Flexicurity acknowledges the advantages of flexibility for employers (and some employees), making it easier to hire and fire; it increases the pay and welfare entitlements of flexi workers over time; and it includes strong provisions for those who are temporarily unemployed in flexible labor markets. The successes of these strategies in reducing unemployment, sustaining growth and reinforcing the state's obligations to protect and secure the most contingent members of the workforce have encouraged European legislators to take them up as a goal for the EU as a whole (Cazes and Nespova, 2007; European Expert Group, 2007). No such entitlements apply to migrants, however, and as their numbers swell the service sector, pink-collar work is more and more awash with unregulated forms of flexploitation.

There, where the perils of low-wage contingency are most acute, considerations of the quality of work life have to start with the demand for dignity and respect. As for creativity, it does not take much for employers to enhance and reward workers' inherent impulse to extract meaning and pleasure from even the most routine tasks. But arguably the most radical potential of immigrant labor politics lies in the argument that a host society owes a standard of life to all those who contribute their labor in meaningful ways. Labor, in this paradigm, is a pathway to quality of life in general – envisaged through the basic provisions available to regularized citizen-residents – access to public education and other services, social housing, labor and civil rights, living wages, social security, and above all, amnesty for the undocumented. So, too, the moral clarity of this claim is buttressed by knowledge, on the part of workers and recipients of the services alike, about the essential utility of the jobs in question. Unlike vast slices of the economy that are devoted to producing unnecessary and environmentally unsustainable goods and services, immigrant-dominated sectors like agriculture, food processing and preparation, construction, trucking, textiles, and cleaning and janitorial services are considered indispensable. In this respect, they satisfy some of the requirements of 'useful toil' set by William

Morris, the patron saint of quality work. In many others, however, they fall into the category of 'prison-torment', which he reserved for burdensome toil that should be done only intermittently, for short periods of work time, and by a greater variety of individuals from different classes (Morris, 1886).

## Political Bedfellows?

Though they occupy opposite ends of the labor market hierarchy, workers in retail and low-end services and the 'creative class' temping in high-end knowledge sectors share certain elements of precarious or nonstandard employment. These include the temporary or intermittent nature of their contracts, the uncertainty of their future, and their isolation from any protective framework of social insurance. Demographically, youth, women and immigrants are disproportionately represented in what some commentators have termed the precariat. While these different segments have existential conditions in common, is there any reason to imagine that they interpret or experience them in similar ways? And, even if they do, is there enough commonality to forge a political coalition of interest against the class polarization associated with economic liberalization?

Over the last decade, precarity emerged as a mobilizing concept for sectors of the European left, and has become a stock slogan among anti-globalization activists (Foti, 2004; Neilson and Rossiter, 2005). Theorists of the Italian post-operaismo school (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996; Virno, 2004), who see the cognitive workforce of 'immaterial labour' as harboring a potential source of power, are often invoked to lend heft to the political consciousness of organized anti-precarity youth groups. Public manifestations of the 'precarious generation' have centered around the Euro-MayDay events, which began to attract tens of thousands of participants in dozens of cities from 2002 onwards (Raunig, 2004, 2007). Organized groups like the Chainworkers in Italy, and Les Intermittents in France captured headlines with their inventive actions. In France, government plans to introduce labor policies that discriminated against youth (making it easier to fire those under 26) generated massive student resistance and occupations of universities in 2006. Formative efforts have been made to link student movements, service worker and immigrant rights struggles with proto-militancy in the new media sectors. The goal has clearly been to build a cross-class alliance – drawn from sectors of the service class, the creative class and the knowledge class – which students and trade unions would come to support (Foti, 2006; Mabrouki, 2004; Shukaitis, 2007).

On the face of it, an alliance of cleaners, web designers and adjunct teachers, to cite just three representative occupations from these sectors, is an unlikely prospect. It is easier to imagine on paper as a theoretically plausible construct than as a flesh-and-blood coalition in broad agreement on strategies and goals. For one thing, there is a sizeable imbalance in the social capital enjoyed by this range of constituents. Those in occupations with the most cachet would almost inevitably expect to be front and center, and, over time, would surely sideline the others (Mitropoulos, 2006:

Shukaitis, 2007; Vishmidt and Gilligan, 2005). So, too, many members of this putative coalition would like nothing more than to have the security of full-time work, with benefits thrown in. Others surely prefer the intermittent life, and take part-time employment so that they can finance other interests, like acting, writing, travel or recreation. Even among low-end service workers, there are reasons to favor flexibility over being locked into dead-end jobs. In this respect, precarity is unevenly experienced across this spectrum of employees, since contingent work arrangements are imposed on some and self-elected by others. In and of itself, precarity cannot be thought of as a common target, but rather as a zone of contestation between competing versions of flexibility in labor markets. Ideally, workers should be free to choose their own level of flexibility in a socially regulated environment where the consequences of such choices are protected against unwanted risk and degradation. Of course, the chances of realizing that ideal are much greater in regions like the EU where employment protection is still a matter for active governance. In countries like the US, with no tradition of social democracy, the prospects are dimmer.

So, too, there appears to be a gulf between the highly individualizing ethos of creative and knowledge workers and the tolerance, even enthusiasm, for traditional, collective action on the part of service workers. Immigrant organizing in campaigns like the Service Employees International Union's Justice for Janitors has played a large, ongoing role in renovating the trade union movement in cities like Los Angeles (Milkman, 2006), and may yet transform the labor movement as a whole. On Mayday 2006, the mass mobilizations against repressive anti-immigrant legislation in a host of US cities were a tribute to the power of collective protest and organization. These developments proved that 'organizing the unorganizable' was not only feasible, but that the results far exceeded expectations, and have given fresh hope to trade unions in decline (Milkman and Voss, 2004).

By that same token, creative and cognitive workers are often assumed to be incapable of organizing on account of their self-directed mentality. Yet, wherever they have turned to union-based action, they have been surprised to find how quickly a common sense of purpose emerges. Recent North American examples include the IT workers in the WashTech union (an affiliate of the Communication Workers of America), who have become a lobbying force on a range of industrial legislation; the adjuncts and graduate teachers who jumpstarted the academic labor movement by organizing at the margins of the profession; and even the most recent Hollywood writers strike, whose internal resolve was buoyed by prominent support from other industry professionals. In each case, employees were organizing in the teeth of industrial cultures that promote an individualist professional ethos, and each discovered that a little solidarity can go a long way. Not long after the writers' strike was resolved, actors joined janitors and longshoremen in a 28-mile march, billed as 'Hollywood to the Docks', as part of an LA campaign for good jobs.

Cross-class coalitions are not easy to envisage, let alone build, but we should be attentive to any evidence of the fellow-feeling that is their precondition (Rose, 2000). In my own research, for example, in IT and other technology-driven firms, I have found it common for employees to refer to their workplaces as 'high-tech sweatshops', especially when they are pressured by long hours, deadline speed-ups, and crunch-time stress on the job (Ross, 2002, 2006). No doubt, these are throwaway comments, and are often simply expressions of the most cynical side of office humor. They can also imply that sweatshops are somehow appropriate for the unskilled, but only for that class of worker. Yet I have found that they also contain real elements of self-recognition and identification with the plight of those toiling in workplaces customarily associated with sweatshop labor.

Historical instances of this kind of complicated identification abound. 'Wage slavery', for example, once resonated as a slogan, in the 1840s, for skilled artisans opposed to factory deskilling and to employers' efforts to make them compete with Southern chattel labor. The slogan also played a role in Abolitionist sentiment and action, though it was increasingly displaced by the explicitly racist shibboleth of 'white slavery' (Roediger, 1991). However fraught as a catchword for the free labor movement of the time, the continuity – between plantation and factory conditions – established by the slogan had a moral power that helped to establish some measure of cross-class and transracial solidarity. Today, I would argue that this moral power has been claimed for the 'global sweatshop'. Activists in the anti-sweatshop movement who sought to harness that power have had a similar kind of impact in building associational sentiment across lines of race and class. They have pieced together an agile, international coalition to confront the power of large corporations and have had some success in pushing labor rights on to the table of the reluctant policymakers who shape global trade agreements (Bender and Greenwald, 2003; Bonacich and Appelbaum, 2000; Esbenshade, 2004; A. Ross, 2004; R. Ross, 2006). The student wing of the movement succeeded in orienting student consciousness toward labor causes, arguably for the first time since the 1930s, and some of that impetus has carried over into cross-class campaigns for a living wage for service workers on campus and in campus towns (Featherstone, 2002).

While the anti-sweatshop movement helped revive public sympathy for the predicament of workers in labor-intensive jobs, it has also made available a moral language and posture for those in value-added trades who are more and more inclined to see their own occupational sectors following a similar path, offshore and downmarket. Now that offshore outsourcing has climbed into white-collar sectors and is taking its toll on the professions, the plight of garment workers, onshore and offshore, can no longer be viewed as a remote example of job degradation, unlikely to affect the highly skilled (A. Ross, 2006). Creatives are only the latest to be told that, come what may, that there will always be a domestic, onshore need for their occupational talents, which cannot be replicated elsewhere. Yet the 'industrialization of

creativity' has been proceeding for some time now, as managers in the knowledge industries seek out project templates that will impose a reliable rhythm on the delivery of intangibles like ideas, concepts, models, formulae and renderings.

Though they tend to share the mentality of elites, independently minded brainworkers are often the easiest to alienate, even radicalize, when their thought processes are subject to routinization. One conspicuous example is the case of the academic professional. Once a domain of occupational security, higher education in the US is now awash with contingency; between a half and three-quarters of its teaching has been casualized, leaving a minority in the tenure-stream to exercise the security and the academic freedoms that are the signature of the profession and, for that matter, of a free society. For the largely youthful ranks of adjuncts, the experience of deprofessionalization has triggered an embryonic labor movement that may yet transform the workplace if it can successfully draw in larger numbers of the securely tenured (Bousquet, 2007). The concomitant demystification of academe and its genteel cult of disinterestedness has cleared the way for a more accurate assessment of its work life – an advance in consciousness that will almost certainly bear more fruit.

For the North American left, the Popular Front remains the shining historical example of cross-class alliances. The ecumenical spirit of the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) challenged the craft-exclusiveness of the AFL (American Federation of Labor) trade unions by its advocacy of organizing the unskilled alongside the skilled (Denning, 1998). Creative sector unions from the fields of entertainment, journalism and the arts made common cause with proletarian interests and reached out to the unemployed, displaced and destitute. The Popular Front was an anti-fascist formation, promoted by the Comintern and its fellow-travelers from 1936, but it would not have been 'popular' if the foundation for these cross-class relationships had not been so soundly laid in the years before. That the liberal version, at least – often termed the New Deal coalition – endured for several decades is a testament to the strength of these alliances.

The backdrop for the Popular Front was, of course, the Great Depression, whose widespread propagation of precarity was the result of a *collapse* of capitalist control. By contrast, today's precarity is, in large part, an *exercise* of capitalist control. Post-industrial capitalism thrives on actively disorganizing employment and socio-economic life in general, so that it can profit from vulnerability, instability and desperation. Some thinkers from the Italian autonomist school see this disorganization as an advantage, because it harbors the potential for pushing creative labor outside the orbit of disciplining institutions such as the state or the trade unions. One of the slogans that captures this tendency is the 'self-organizing precariat'. It speaks not only to the oppositional side of the 'free agency' mentality lionized by liberation capitalists, but also to the long-standing traditions of grassroots democracy in workers' movements.

In some respects, this autonomous tendency may be interpreted as a clear rejection of the path taken by New Left advocates who pursued the 'long march through the institutions' from the early 1970s onwards, with the goal of reforming the culture of power from the inside. But today's institutional boundaries are no longer demarcated so cleanly. The centrifugal impact of deregulation has shifted some of the balance of power toward *outlying* locations; renegade centers of accumulation in the economy (hedge funds, or startups gone global like Google, eBay and Starbucks); civil society and outside-the-beltway organizations in politics and welfare delivery (evangelical churches, human rights NGOs, corporate social responsibility divisions); and, in the sphere of ideology, the myriad of 'alternative' sites of cultural and informational activity that populate the busy landscape of attention. So, too, work has been increasingly distributed from sites of production to the realm of consumption and social networking. The outside is no longer the extraneous – marginal or peripheral to the real decision-making centers. Increasingly it is where the action is located, and where our attention to building resistance and solidarity might be best directed. The recent focusing of policymakers' interest in a heretofore fringe sector like creative labor can quite rightly be seen as part of that story.

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